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Human resources management

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on young professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit for the consideration of the members of the General Assembly his comments, as well as those of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Young professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention" (see A/55/798).

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Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Young professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention"

General comments

1. Pursuant to the provision of article 11, section 4 (e), of the statute of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), the Secretary-General presents the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) on the report of JIU entitled "Young professionals in selected organizations of the United Nations system: recruitment, management and retention".

2. In respect of this study's objective, which is "to compare and analyse policies and practices ... with regard to the recruitment and management of entry-level professionals with a view to making recommendations as to ways to prepare and retain a cadre of dedicated and competent professionals ...", it is important to underline that there are significant differences between organizations' mandates, structures, size of workforce, etc. There is no single "best practice" in human resources management to which United Nations agencies can look as a universal model. Best practice is that which works best in the context and interests of each individual organization.

3. Human resources requirements and strategies which must be matched to the programme needs of an organization have therefore to be determined by each individual organization rather than be subject to any form of common prescription across the United Nations system. This was recognized by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) in its Framework for Human Resources Management which was presented to the General Assembly in its report for the year 2000.[1]

4. The international civil service now operates in a completely different world from that of the immediate post-Second World War period. Originally, it had been anticipated that the organizations would, for the most part, appoint young persons who would rise through the ranks. Organizations are required now to provide immediate advice on highly complex problems in every area, be it nuclear safety, the spread of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) or industrial restructuring; this advice must therefore be given by high-level specialists with global experience. In addition, zero nominal growth over the past decade, which has led to the flattening of organizational structures so as to allow for more lateral exchanges of expertise, has impacted negatively on organizations' capacity to design organizational structures and jobs suitable for young professionals. Appointment practices vary considerably from agency to agency and often bear little relation to the earlier "career" concept. "Entry level" for many specialized agencies may often refer to someone in mid-career recruited for senior specialist responsibilities at the P-4 or P-5 level.

5. This being said, there is growing recognition that the effective recruitment, management and retention of staff constitute an encompassing function that includes selection, training and development, compensation, work organization and structural considerations. Across the system, innovative approaches are being explored and introduced such as more effective systems to support the systematic assessment of future staffing requirements, competency-based assessment centres, new induction and mentoring and coaching programmes etc.

6. At the same time, organizations have to increasingly compete with a range of other global employers for a talented workforce. To recruit and retain good performers, reduce undesirable turnover, and promote institutional loyalty, the need for competitive employment conditions is of paramount importance. Compensation is not, however, the only concern. The expectations of this younger workforce are evolving in different areas: opportunities to develop skills, chances for promotion, the existence of an appealing organizational culture, and spouse employment are all among their areas of concern.

Comments on the specific recommendations contained in the report

Recommendation 1

Secretariats should undertake specific efforts to reduce the age at recruitment for all Professional posts, and for P-1 to P-3 posts in particular. The United Nations Secretariat may wish, for its part, to review the adequacy of the age limit presently imposed for National Competitive Recruitment Examination (NCRE) candidates (paras. 8-13)

7. There is overall agreement that efforts should be made to reduce the age of recruitment, keeping in mind that requirements must be tailored to the needs of each organization.

Recommendation 2

Trends concerning separations of Professional staff in the United Nations system should be more carefully monitored through:

(a) The inclusion by the Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (Personnel and General Administrative Questions) (CCAQ (PER)) in its annual publication entitled "Personnel Statistics" of data on separation of Professional staff broken down by grade and type of separation;

(b) The design of exit questionnaires by secretariats that have not yet instituted them to better identify causes of resignations. Such questionnaires may be completed or replaced by structured exit interviews (paras. 15-18)

8. Organizations agree that the use of structured exit questionnaires could provide a sound basis for capturing data and analysing separations systematically. Once all organizations have captured and electronically stored these findings in their own databases, this information could then be captured, stored and analysed in the common system database maintained by the ACC secretariat.

Recommendation 3

Secretariats of all organizations concerned should speed up recruitment processes by imposing strict deadlines for the review of applications by managers and the placement of candidates (paras. 35-37)

9. Secretariats of all organizations agree that there is a need to accelerate recruitment processes. In fact, a number of innovative ideas were put forward at the ACC High-level Committee on Management in December 2000: more creative job advertisements, use of generic job descriptions, rostering/pooling of pre-screened applications, using headhunters, use of "remote" assessment centres, simplification of processes, improved work environments, focusing on lower-level recruitments based on pools/rosters, and making employment conditions more competitive.

Recommendation 4

Further efforts should be undertaken by the Secretariat to accelerate the placement of successful NCRE candidates, reduce the number of candidates presently on the roster, and optimize the use of this roster, through:

(a) Strengthening linkages among human resources planning, examinations and staffing, which should be conducted not as separate operations but as an integrated process;

(b) Submitting proposals to the General Assembly to further contain the number of candidates on the roster, such as time limitations on its validity or the automatic suspension of the examination in occupational groups for which the roster exceeds a predetermined number of candidates;

(c) Sharing the roster with other organizations, especially for common occupational fields (paras. 23-25)

10. The United Nations Secretariat continues in its efforts to accelerate the placement of successful NCRE candidates. Planning, examinations and staffing are being integrated into a continuous process, inter alia, through departmental human resources action plans. The roster of successful NCRE candidates is an

essential and integral part of the recruitment process and, in the view of the United Nations Secretariat, should not be administratively restricted beyond the regulations currently in force. The United Nations Secretariat agrees to pursue the sharing of this roster with other organizations, and welcomes the possibility that this will accord with the widening of their recruitment networks; however, it must be kept in mind that each organization must meet its own recruitment requirements and procedures.

Recommendation 5

The General Assembly may wish to call on Member States to cooperate more effectively in the organization of the examination and, in particular, in its publicity. The Secretary-General could also include in regular reports on human resources management examples of good practices in this regard (para. 22)

11. While this recommendation is primarily addressed to the United Nations Secretariat, all organizations recognize the instrumental role that member States can play in widely disseminating information on employment opportunities and upholding the principles set down in Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations. Organizations would also welcome the sharing of experiences and best practices of member States regarding the integration, orientation and development of staff.

Recommendation 6

Secretariats that have not done so should set up structures to assist with the successful integration of young professionals during their first months through:

(a) Clearly identifying focal points in substantive departments to assist new recruits with all practical problems;

(b) Designing appropriate orientation courses for the young professionals; such courses could be organized jointly with the support of the United Nations Staff College;

(c) Instituting mentoring programmes whereby more senior officers can advise young professionals on substantive and career issues (paras. 47-52)

12. Organizations recognize the importance of orientation and induction programmes in order for new officials at all levels to perform effectively and efficiently as well as to create a shared understanding of an organization's vision and culture. Zero nominal growth has somewhat handicapped organizations' capacity to take large initiatives in this regard; nonetheless, a number of pilot orientation and mentoring programmes are being instituted at the organizational level and ACC has supported the development of a common system orientation training programme through the United Nations Staff College.

Recommendation 7

Secretariats of organizations concerned should offer the opportunity to junior professional staff members to pursue studies and research in fields of relevance to their work by making them eligible sooner for study leave or by instituting new part-time study schemes (para. 51)

13. As mentioned under general comments above, the provision of developmental opportunities is generally recognized as an important element in attracting and retaining a quality workforce. Such opportunities must be managed within budgetary constraints and in light of an organization's projected skill/competence requirements. Thus, it would not be appropriate to give priority to junior professionals when there may exist a legitimate need for further training of a more seasoned employee if it was in the interests of the organization.

Recommendation 8

Secretariats of organizations concerned should increase opportunities for young professionals to be assigned both at Headquarters and in the field in the course of their first five or six years. The Secretariat of the United Nations, in particular, should further improve career development for young professionals. In due course, it should assess the impact of its Managed Reassignment Programme to ensure that it facilitates mobility not only between departments but also between duty stations and that it contributes to upward as well as lateral mobility (paras. 53-57)

14. Organizations recognize that mobility offers an opportunity to enhance the flexibility of its workforce by providing staff with on-the-job learning experiences through which to develop a broader understanding of the work of an organization as well as new skills. This being said, it should be recalled that a number of organizations have no programmatic need for geographical mobility.

Recommendation 9

Managers in organizations concerned should devote sufficient time and attention to the development of their junior staff. Appraisal of the way in which they discharge this responsibility should be an integral part of their performance evaluation (para. 59)

15. Organizations' management development programmes and performance appraisal systems are increasingly emphasizing the importance of the supervisors'/managers' role in supporting effective people management and development, regardless of age group, which is evidenced, for example, in their competency frameworks, such as those of the United Nations, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Recommendation 10

Efforts to facilitate spouse employment should be undertaken as follows:

(a) Secretariats in major duty stations should set up joint family-career transition programmes;

(b) Governing bodies of organizations that still forbid spouse employment should rescind this restriction by amending relevant staff regulations;

(c) The General Assembly should renew its call to Governments in host countries to consider granting work permits for spouses accompanying staff members, and monitor the implementation of relevant resolutions (paras. 70-76)

16. As stated in the ACC policy statement entitled "Work/family agenda", organizations of the United Nations common system are committed to introducing — as best fits each organization's structure and mandate — supportive measures to enhance employment opportunities for staff members' partners. To this end, there was introduced the Participating Agencies Mobility System (PAMS), which provides staff members and their partners with a simple electronic means over the Internet of bringing their career aspirations to the attention of any other agency anywhere in the world. A feasibility study to extend PAMS (phase II) with the introduction of a searchable database and the inclusion of a broader array of international organizations will be undertaken in the third quarter of 2001.

17. Organizations strongly support efforts to encourage host Governments to consider granting work permits for spouses accompanying staff members.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 30* (A/55/30), annex II.